

Volunteer Handbook



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History: Founded in 1989 by Hank & Judy Gillespie, The RTC's first location was off of Lower Mission Valley Road until it moved to its current location in 1999. Operating on 20 acres with an outdoor and covered arena, Sensory Trail and Wooded Trail, The RTC is a PATH (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship) Intl (formerly NARHA) 501(c)(3) Non-profit organization and operates through the generosity of donations, granting foundations and through the work of fundraising campaigns. All donations are tax-deductible.

PATH Intl, founded in 1969 establishes and oversees standards for accreditation of centers, instructors and equine specialists. Membership and accreditation are voluntary. All RTC instructors must be certified through PATH Intl and comply with all annual certification and CEU requirements.

The growing field of Equine Assisted Activities and Therapies (EAAT) encompasses any of the specific activities conducted at a center: Therapeutic Riding (TR), Hippotherapy, Carriage Driving, Interactive Vaulting, Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) and Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL). Each activity or therapy requires a specific certification and ongoing training.

Staff and Volunteers: The RTC is primarily volunteer-based. Volunteers serve as members of the board of directors, horse handlers, sidewalkers, work day volunteers, office assistants, event and committee help in addition to other needs that arise within the organization. The RTC's program would not be possible without the selfless dedication of volunteers. Volunteers donate thousands of hours every year to The RTC and are considered an invaluable.

Clients/Riders:

Population Served: Any individual ages 4 years old and up with any disability, special need or mental illness. Some of the many disabilities served are Cerebral Palsy, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Stroke, Sensory Processing Disorder, Depression, Behavior Disorders, ADHD, Amputations, Down Syndrome, Mental Retardation, Head Trauma/Brain Injury, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, among many others.

Horses: All program horses must complete a desensitization and training program before being admitted into the program. Each horse has their unique function within the program: gait, size, riders served and personalities. We are always looking for additional 4-legged team members who meet our program's criteria. If interested in donating a horse or tack, please contact the Equine Coordinator at 361-578-8182 or theridingtherapycenter@gmail.com.

Programs offered:

- *Therapeutic Riding*

Definition – Mounted horseback riding from the purpose of contributing positively to cognitive, physical, emotional and social well-being of people with disabilities through the teaching of horsemanship skills. Uses physical, cognitive, speech and occupational therapies in conjunction with the horse's three-dimensional hip movement to transfer motion to the rider that is similar to the walking gait of a human.

Benefits – Promotes strength, flexibility, balance, coordination, circulation, and increases self-confidence and autonomy among many others. Riding is a total body exercise and engages the body, mind and emotions. It appeals to different learning styles, stimulates various sensory input systems (Vestibular, Proprioceptive, Tactile and Visual) and often improves ones social skills. (As a volunteer, you will become friends, potentially role models for the riders. Consistency in volunteering is highly encouraged).

- *Unmounted or Ground Activities*
Definition - Includes catching and leading the horse from pasture, safe tying, grooming, tacking and other ground work with the horse at the walk and trot to further facilitate the bond between horse and rider and teach safety, body and behavioral awareness. Learning the horse anatomy, parts of the saddle and tack, grooming tools and stable responsibility are also part of this curriculum

Benefits – Available for those who do not meet the weight requirement for mounted activities. Improves one’s safety and body awareness, fosters responsibility and uses the horse as a mirror for the client’s actions, emotions and body language.

- *Equine Services for Heroes*
Purpose –To positively impact the lives of Veterans with the physical, social and emotional therapeutic benefits of horses to help them adjust to their post-war lives.
Benefits – Same as Therapeutic Riding in addition to fostering trust, empathy and independence.

Guidelines for Volunteers

Roles of the Volunteer

Level One – Activities/Lesson Assistant

Level Two – Sidewalker

- Must be at least 14 years of age.
- Must demonstrate awareness and responsibility.

Level Three – Horse Handler

- Must have prior horse experience.
- Must complete and pass the HH tryouts.
- Must demonstrate ability to follow all directions from instructor.

Other Ways to Help

- Office
- Grant Writing/Fundraising
- Facility Maintenance
- Volunteer Work Days
- Community Events: Buddy Walk, Victoria Livestock Show, etc.

Getting Started

Signing In/Out

- Location of Sign In/Out Sheet.

Signing Up

- Location of sign-up sheets.
- Only sign up for roles you have been trained for.
- Regular commitment and consistency with riders is highly encouraged. If you sign up you are expected to be there for your rider.

- *Punctuality:* Volunteers are required to be signed in and ready to work with their riders 15-30 minutes prior to the lesson time. If you need to cancel it is your responsibility to notify the instructor ASAP so that a replacement for you can be found. 24 hours advanced notice is requested.
- *Lesson Cancellations:* If lessons are going to be cancelled due to rain or other inclement weather, volunteers that are signed up will be notified via their preferred mode of communication by 3:00 pm.
- *Dress Code*
 - o Must wear closed-toed shoes at all times.
 - o No dangly jewelry.
 - o No short shorts (must come past your fingertips) and no low-cut tops.
 - o After volunteering three times, volunteers will receive a free RTC t-shirt and are expected to wear this during lessons.
- *Cell Phone Use* – The use of cell phones is not permitted during lessons. Please turn all cell phones to silent while volunteering and refrain from using in front of riders, as this may be a distraction to them. Under no circumstances are volunteers allowed to be on their phones (talk or text) when assisting during lessons.
- *Children and Pets* – Due to safety concerns, unsupervised children are not allowed. Please make other arrangements for your children on days that you volunteer at The RTC so that your full attention can be given to the rider you are working with. Additionally, no personal pets are allowed on The RTC property.
- *Confidentiality Requirements* – Each rider’s privacy is protected by the HIPAA act. You are not allowed to identify a rider that plans to, has or is currently participating in The RTC’s program outside of lessons. Staff are allowed to discuss symptoms, progress and goals for each rider, but are not permitted to give out specific diagnoses.

Disability Awareness

Here are some basic suggestions on how to relate to individuals with disabilities:

- A person with a disability is an individual first and is entitled to the same dignity, respect and considerations expected by anyone.
- Treat adults as adults. Only help a person with a disability if they ask for assistance. You may offer assistance, but if it is declined, do not be offended. Avoid false sympathy.
- When assisting an individual with a disability always ask “how” you can help. Do not take over.
- Always address the person with a disability directly. Do not speak “about” them as if they were not present.
- Do not shout. Hearing aids make noises louder, not clearer. Also, blindness does not affect a person’s hearing.
- If a person has difficulty speaking, allow them to finish their sentence. If you do not understand what they are saying, tell them so. Do not pretend you understood if you didn’t.
- When meeting a person with a visual impairment, always identify yourself and tell them you are leaving before you walk away.
- Do not push a person’s wheelchair, grab their arm or try to help without asking first. Never move someone’s crutches, walkers, canes, service animal or other mobility aid without permission.
- When speaking to a person with a disability who uses a wheelchair, find yourself a chair or crouch down at a comfortable distance so that you can converse on the same level.
- When speaking to someone with a hearing impairment speak slowly, clearly and face them directly while speaking.

“People” First Language

- The individual is always placed before the disability. The clients are a “person with a disability” - not a “disabled person.”
- Never refer to a person by their disability, for example a “paraplegic” or a “blind” person. The accepted terminology is a “person who has paraplegia” or a “person who is blind.”
- People are not “confined” or “bound” to wheelchairs. They “use” these devices for mobility and to enhance their freedom. It is more appropriate to say “an individual who uses a wheelchair.”
- Completely avoid emotionally laden terms such as “suffering with a disease”, “afflicted with” or “burdened by”. A person with a disability may “have” an illness or may be “challenged” by a condition, but one should never assume that a person is suffering, burdened or afflicted.
- When writing or speaking about individuals with disabilities always focus on ability, accomplishment and quality of life.
- Avoid using “us” and “them” language when speaking of people with disabilities versus people who are able bodied. Statistics have shown that most able-bodied people will experience a disability at some point in their life. We are all people first.

Working with the Clients

- Each client will have different characteristics. It is important to understand these so you, as a volunteer will be able to better work with them throughout their lessons. Consistent commitments will help you get to know the clients best.
- Expressive/Receptive Speech
 - Speech skills can be cognitive or physically limited. It takes time to understand a client’s specific speech patterns. If you do not understand what they said, ask the client to repeat what they said. Refrain from acting like you understood them when you really didn’t.
- Sensory Overload
 - Some clients are unable to listen and look at the same time. Don’t be offended if they do not make eye contact with you when you are speaking to them.
- Behavior Issues
 - Tantrums or Aggressiveness can be a form of communication for some clients. Work to figure out what is behind it to diffuse or avoid the situation and remember to not take it personally.

Lesson Procedures

Grooming and Tacking

- Always ask for help if you are unsure of what to do.
- Check in with the Tacking Manager who will have each day’s sheet for lessons.

Mounting Procedures

- Greet and assist clients prior to mount.
- Retrieve the client’s assigned helmet number and appropriately sized safety belt.
- Always remain between the client and horse until mounted.
- Trained designated volunteers are allowed to assist with mounting (SW 1).
- Do not allow client to mount until Instructor completes safety check and HH is ready.

Horse Handling

- HH (leaders) should have prior horse experience and must complete a HH tryouts before being able to horse handling during lessons.

- The HH's primary concern is the horse.
- Categories: Active > Passive > Passive Off the Lead Line > Spotting
- Always attach a lead rope when leaving arena (trails), even for independent riders.

Sidewalkers

- Primary concern is the client.
- Types of Support: Over the thigh with double arm lock > Over the thigh > Below the knee > Ankle hold > Spotting.
- When leaving arena, always move to arm over thigh hold. Most riders require arm over thigh at the trot.
- Keep talking during lessons to a minimum. Keep client's attention focused on Instructor and lesson objectives/activities.

Dismounting

- Only designated and trained sidewalkers are permitted to dismount the rider.
- Only dismount at the Instructor's discretion.
- Types of dismount: Full assist to ground (leg over horse's crest) > Partial assist to ground (Leg over horse's croup) > Spot > Independent.
- Escort out of arena to parent. Clients are not allowed to take off helmets until they are out of arena.

Emergency Procedures

- SAFETY FIRST
- Know your role during the emergency, before the emergency. It is your responsibility as a Volunteer to be familiar with The RTC's Hazards, Disasters and Emergency Plan found in the "Volunteer Packet (Read and Keep).
- Location of emergency supplies (First Aid Kits, Fire Extinguishers, Phone and Emergency numbers).
 - First Aid Kits: Office, Tack Room and Wooded Trail.
 - Fire Extinguishers: Office, Volunteer Room, Tack Room, Restrooms, Feed Room.
 - Phone located in office.
 - Emergency Numbers and Information are located adjacent to phone in the office.

General Safety Rules

- The RTC property is alcohol and tobacco free.
- The mistreatment, abuse or verbal suggestions of abuse of anyone or of any animal will NOT be tolerated.
- Clients and their family members are not allowed in restricted areas. It is very important that all gates remain shut during lesson operations. Only clients accompanied by a volunteer or instructor are allowed beyond these restricted areas.
- It is in the best interest of all involved that no volunteer be alone with a client at any time. Volunteers are not allowed to accompany clients to the restroom. **Parents or caregivers are responsible for the supervision of their children at all times.**
- In order to avoid distracting riders or horses during class, everyone is asked to refrain from leaning or climbing on all arena fences. Also, photography is NOT allowed during the classes unless you have permission from the instructor.
- Horse treats may be brought out by riders and volunteers. All horses must be fed treats via bucket, never by the hand and may only be fed at the Instructor's discretion and supervision.

We are here for the riders first. Please be aware of your surroundings and whether there is a lesson going on (mounted or unmounted). Extra conversations, eating, cell phones or other activities can be distracting to riders. It is your responsibility to know when you are signed up and which rider you are working with **BEFORE** the rider arrives. Please have helmet and belt (if needed) ready and be ready to greet the rider as they arrive. From the moment the rider arrives, you need to put them first: first in your conversations, first in your actions and first in your responsibility. You are here to help facilitate an effective lesson and positive experience for each rider.

Horse Sense Training

- Never feed horse's from the hand.
- If a horse has a halter on, they are not allowed to graze. Halter = Time to work, not eat.
- Cross-ties have a quick-release safety feature. Some horses do not go on cross-ties, check with instructor if unsure.
- Approaching a horse – Approach calmly and to the shoulder. Never sneak up on a horse or run towards. Use your voice first.
- Be calm and confident – “Fake it ‘til you make it”.
- Watch your feet – If your foot gets stepped on, do not attempt to pull your foot out from under a 1200 pound animal. Maneuver the horse so he picks his foot up from yours.
- No sudden movements.
- Prevent riders from walking behind the horse.
- Never bend down directly in front of or behind the horse, always do activities to the side of the horse, or if picking up an object allow horse to walk away a few feet before bending down to retrieve.
- When going through gates, always make sure you go through the gate first, the horse should follow you.